



## A Priest King in Nigeria.

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## A PRIEST KING IN NIGERIA.

THE following communication from Mr. P. A. Talbot, District Commissioner at Degema, South Nigeria, has been kindly forwarded by Sir J. G. Frazer, who writes: "This seems to be a notable discovery of a fresh African parallel to the priest of Nemi. Taken with Dr. Seligmann's discovery of a similar line of priestly kings among the Shilluk, it seems to show that the institution was widely spread in Africa":

While collecting information concerning the festivals held at Elele—an Ibo town of about five thousand inhabitants in the north-west of Degema district—chance brought to light that the dominant Juju of this region is called Ayaeke, the present priest of which is a powerful chief named Ileshi. At the feast of new yams, before the new season's crop may be eaten by anyone in this neighbourhood, the head priest of Ayaeke must eat a yam which has been kept over from the last harvest. This is the first which he has eaten from the year before, and is therefore called his "new season's yam," because he may never take fresh yams in his mouth. Every year, on this occasion, a great feast is given, during which each man, woman and child in the town bears a gift to the priest. Even little babes, too small to stand alone, must be carried to his compound, where the mothers press a gift into the tiny hands and then hold them out towards the chief, that not even the smallest should fail to make offering. The compound, where the Juju is kept, is called Omo-kpuruku, and in this, from his election until his death, at most seven years later—even should the full term of office be completed—the priest dwells, carefully guarded by all his people, and never once crossing the threshold unless summoned forth by some grave emergency.

The reason for this restriction is that, up to a few years ago, any man who succeeded in killing him would reign in his stead.

The whole prosperity of the town, especially the fruitfulness of farm, byre and marriage-bed, was linked with his life. Should he fall sick, therefore, it entailed famine and grave disaster upon the inhabitants, and there is reason to believe that in such a case facilities were offered to a successor. Under no circumstances did the term of office last for more than seven full years. This prohibition still holds; but now another of the same family, who must always be a strong man, is said to be chosen in his stead—at any rate this is stated to have been the case with regard to Chief Ileshi. No sooner is a successor appointed, however, than the former holder of the dignity is reported “to die for himself.” It was owned quite frankly that, before Government came, *i.e.* not more than a dozen years ago, things were arranged differently, in that, at any time during his seven years’ term, the priest might be put to death by any man strong and resourceful enough to effect this.

In answer to the question as to whether, in view of the fate known to follow after so short a period, it was not difficult to find men willing to succeed to the office on such terms, Mr. Braid, Native Court Clerk of Elele, answered in a somewhat surprised tone: “Oh, no! Many men wish for the post, because so much wealth is brought them at the annual festival, that they become very rich—past all others in the town.”

The compound, in which the priest of Ayaeke dwells, amid all the cult of fetishes, is said to be full of carved figures, which were described to us as resembling those of the “ancestors” set up, each in its separate shrine, in the houses of New Calabari chiefs. It is probable that, in this case, each represents a former priest of the Juju.

During his term of office, Chief Ileshi has only been known to pass beyond the compound walls for one reason. The occasion was as follows:

A fellow townsman accused him of making a Juju to kill the complainant. The case came into court, and all unknowing of the excitement which such a proceeding must cause, the Chief was bidden answer the charge. He came, attended by all the

townsfolk, who not only filled the courtyard, which is a very large enclosed space, but thronged the market-place outside. They came, in a state of great anxiety, to watch over the sacred priest and guard him, so far as in them lay, from any misfortune, the effects of which it was believed would at once react on all the countryside. On his head the chief always wears a hat decorated with seven eagle's feathers, and surmounted by the tail of a parrot.

So soon as official work allows, I am arranging to return to Elele to visit, and, if possible, photograph the chief in the sacred compound, with all the cult objects, and, in any case, gain every available scrap of information concerning him, his predecessors, and the cult itself, which is quite obviously connected with the spirit of vegetation.

It seems to me that here, alive and to our very hand, we have a triumphant refutation of all those who thought the theory of "Priests who slew the Slayer" far fetched and even impossible.